

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Donald McKayle

PERSON

McKayle, Donald, 1930-

Alternative Names: Donald McKayle;

Life Dates: July 6, 1930-April 6, 2018

Place of Birth: New York, New York, USA

Residence: Irvine, CA

Work: Irvine, CA

Occupations: ; Choreographer; Educator

Biographical Note

Choreographer and educator Donald McKayle was born on July 6, 1930 in New York City, New York to Eva Wilhelmina Cohen McKayle and Philip Augustus McKayle. Inspired by a Pearl Primus performance, he began dancing his senior year in high school, and won a scholarship to the New Dance Group in 1947.

In 1948, McKayle choreographed his first piece of

work with the New Dance Group, and premiered his solo piece, *Saturday's Child*. From 1951 to 1969, McKayle founded and directed his own dance company, Donald McKayle and Company, which premiered his first major work entitled *Games* in 1951. McKayle then went on to choreograph masterworks *Rainbow 'Round My Shoulder*, *District Storyville* and *Songs of the Disinherited*. *Golden Boy* (1964) was his first Broadway production, followed by *I'm Solomon* (1969) and *Dr. Jazz* (1975). McKayle directed and choreographed *Raisin* (1974), which was awarded a Tony for best musical. He was responsible for the entire concept, staging and choreography of the award-winning *Sophisticated Ladies* (1981). McKayle has also choreographed for films, including *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1970), *The Great White Hope* (1972), and *The Minstrel Man* (1976). McKayle has also choreographed stage acts for singers such as Harry Belafonte and Rita Moreno. In 2001, he choreographed the monumental ten-hour production of *Tantalus*.

The repositories for McKayle's work include the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, the Cleveland San Jose Ballet, and the Los Angeles Contemporary Dance Theatre. He served as head of the Inner City Repertory Dance Company from 1970 to 1974, and then as choreographer for the Limon Dance Company since 1995. In all, McKayle choreographed over ninety performances for dance companies in the U.S., Canada, Israel, Europe and South America. He has taught at Bennington College, the Juilliard School, the American Dance Festival, and in Europe. McKayle served as dean of the School of Dance at the California Institute of the Arts, and as professor of dance and the artistic director for the University of California, Irvine Dance.

McKayle has received numerous honors and awards, including an Outer Critics Circle Award, a NAACP Image Award, the Capezio Award, the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival Award, the American Dance Guild Award, a Living Legend Award

from the National Black Arts Festival, two Choreographer's Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Dance/USA Honors, the Martha Hill Lifetime Achievement Award, the Annual Award from the Dance Masters of America, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Dance Under the Stars Choreography Festival, the Black College Dance Exchange Honors, the Dance Magazine Award, and the American Dance Legacy Institute's Distinguished and Innovative Leadership Award, among others. In 2005, McKayle was honored at the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. and presented with a medal as a Master of African American Choreography. He has been named by the Dance Heritage Coalition as "one of America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: the first 100."

McKayle is the author of the 2002 autobiography, *Transcending Boundaries: My Dancing Life*.

McKayle passed away on April 6, 2018.

Donald McKayle was interviewed by The HistoryMakers on December 17, 2013.

Related Entries

City College of New York [STUDENTOF]

[\[from ? to ?\]](#)

P.S. 101 Andrew Draper School [STUDENTOF]

[\[from ? to ?\]](#)

St. Charles Borromeo School [STUDENTOF]

[\[from ? to ?\]](#)

P.S. 46 Arthur Tappan School [STUDENTOF]

[\[from ? to ?\]](#)

Junior High School 118, William H. Hines [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

DeWitt Clinton High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

New Dance Group [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Bennington College [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Lecturer

Juilliard School [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Lecturer

American Dance Festival [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

Lecturer

New Dance Group [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1947 to ?]

Choreographer

Donald McKayle and Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1951 to 1969]

Founder, Choreographer

Inner City Repertory Dance Company [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1970 to 1974]

Head

California Institute of the Arts [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1975 to ?]

Artistic Director and Dean

University of California, Irvine [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1989 to ?]

Professor and Artistic Director

Limon Dance Company [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1995 to ?]

Choreographer